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Meet Mayor Daley's new political pinata

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Chicago aldermen have a new political pinata.

Scott Bruner, a Harvard-educated lawyer who spent 11 years in the state's attorney's office, has been chosen by Mayor Daley to run the city's Department of Administrative Hearings, the agency aldermen and their constituents love to hate.

Bruner currently serves as director of the Department of Business Affairs and Licensing. He inherits an agency known among aldermen as the "Department of Cha-ching" for raking in fines and treating 500,000 annual parking ticket scofflaws and other offenders "like crap."

Jim Reilly, the city's first and only director of Administrative Hearings, resigned the \$151,860-a-year job in August after 11 years on the hot seat.

Every year, aldermen pummel the director of Administrative Hearings about a "kangaroo court" of rude, cavalier and predominantly white hearing officers who don't give the accused a fair shake — even those who produce hard evidence that contradicts the violation.

"Every time I see you, I think 'cha-ching,'" Ald. Bernard Stone (50th) once told Reilly.

On Tuesday, Stone had some sage and simple advice for Bruner.

"Let justice prevail — not the pocketbook. They've been more interested in how much money they can raise, as opposed to justice," Stone said.

Building code violations processed through administrative adjudication are a classic example of the city's misplaced priorities, said Stone, chairman of the Buildings Committee.

"The main thing is to have the building repaired — not how much you can take in in fines. If your primary goal is to get buildings in good shape, they're not fulfilling their goal," he said.

The march toward "administrative adjudication" of minor offenses started in 1990 with parking tickets.

In 1996, Daley created the Department of Administrative Hearings to speed punishment for violators of most other city laws.

The move consolidated all 280,000 noncriminal cases each year into the new department, with an eye toward building stronger cases against repeat offenders and imposing stricter fines.

The change was recommended by a Daley-appointed committee on code enforcement chaired by attorney Kevin M. Forde. In its final report, Forde's commission recommended a process where notices of violation would be "presumed correct." In many cases, that meant the city would not be required to present testimony of police officers or other enforcement employees.

"People get a fair shake before administrative law judges in the federal system and before hearings officers in the state system. We have no problems with the fairness of the system. If procedurally it's unfair, you can appeal to a court," Forde then, denying that violators would be denied due process.

Complaints have been rolling ever since from aldermen who argue that the deck is stacked against the accused. Now, it'll be Scott Bruner's headache.

On the day he resigned, Reilly put it this way: "Each year, hundreds of thousands of

people are cited by police, inspectors and investigators — either personally, at their business or building. They come to my doorstep. Most of them are not happy to be here. I understand that. [But] I think we do a very good job of providing them with due process,” he said.

Despite chronic complaints, Reilly maintained that 30 percent of his 80 hearing officers are African-American. The number of Hispanic hearing officers had doubled in the past year — to four, he said.

Daley has also appointed Acting Housing Commissioner Ellen Sahli to the permanent \$142,860-a-year job, replacing Jack Markowski. Sahli has been the city's passionate point-person in the drive to end homelessness.